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THE REVOLT OF THE ADMIRALS

by

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Preface

The “revolt of the admirals” is a subject that has intrigued military officers for some time. The revolt was actually an intense inter-service debate between the Navy and the Air Force ostensibly over the B-36 bomber program. The conflict grew; however, to encompass not only the B-36 and the proposed carrier *United States*, but also it became a struggle over unification and roles and missions. Additionally, the revolt is of particular interest to military officers of today. Living in the politically charged environment in which we are forced to survive, it is refreshing to study the sincere and poignant arguments of some of the greatest military officers in American history engaged in debate over doctrine. Names like Halsey, Nimitz, Spruance, Burke, Eaker, Spaatz, Vandenberg, Eisenhower, and Bradley all had direct influence in the controversy, and we are obliged as military officers to take note of their arguments and concerns of nearly fifty years ago.

I would like to thank Dr Harold Selesky, Dr John Beeler, and Commander Albert St Clair for their assistance in research and writing techniques. I also must thank Mary, who is a very large part of all that I do both in my professional and personal life.

Abstract

When the controversy over the B-36 erupted in the spring of 1949, Pandora's Box was opened on service unification issues. The debate was officially over the B-36 procurement process, but it grew to include a debate over roles and missions between the Air Force and the Navy. The Congressional testimony before the House Armed Services Committee illustrated some pertinent lessons from the "revolt of the admirals."

The Air Force won the revolt, but the question was why? Was it because their case was sounder than the Navy's, or was it for some other hidden reason? How did doctrine, leadership, and public relations factor into the conflict?

This essay will discuss these questions using primary and secondary source material from the Air University Library and the Air Force Historical Research Agency; both located at Maxwell AFB, Alabama. There are few books (*Revolt of the Admirals; the Fight for Naval Aviation, 1945-1950* by Jeffrey Barlow is the one notable exception.) that deal directly with the subject, but there is sufficient peripheral information and a considerable amount of source material in the form of periodical literature. The subject will be discussed addressing the previously mentioned categories of doctrine, leadership, and public relations. First, the historical framework of unification will be established.

The Air Force won the "revolt" quite simply because their leadership was congruent and their public relations effort was polished. The weaknesses in Air Force doctrine as

well as the strengths of Navy doctrine were not highlighted due to the Navy's fragmented leadership and poor public relations.

Chapter 1

Introduction

It contained many of the elements of human passion that make a good story: secret (and perhaps sinister) dealings by individuals and organizations; anonymous charges of malfeasance and financial corruption in connection with an important defense contract; and an openly aired rivalry between two powerful military services, the Navy and the Air Force.¹

—Jeffrey G. Barlow
Revolt of the Admirals

The testimony before the House of Representatives by senior military personnel, and specifically senior officials from the Navy, during October 1949 sent a shock wave through the entire country. The United States Air Force “won” the debate known as the “revolt of the admirals.”² The proposed carrier *United States* was canceled on 23 April 1949, the B-36 bomber was cast as the primary offensive weapon in America’s arsenal, and until the Korean War, Naval Aviation struggled for survival.³ Why was the Navy’s public relations effort so poorly focused, organized, and presented? What were the actors’ arguments? Was the Navy argument based solely on disputing the Air Force stance? Why was the Air Force more adept than the Navy in presenting its case? Did the Air Force leadership have a blind faith in long-range bombers such as the B-36? What were the historical consequences of the outcome of the “revolt?” After service unification in 1947, were all disputes over roles and missions, as well as budget battles over new weapon

systems, going to be held in a public forum? What were the reports by the popular press of the inter-service fighting during the revolt?

“The early months of 1949 were to bring new men, new organizational structures, new turns of controversy to civil-military relationships,”⁴ notes Walter Millis in his study *Arms and the State*. Service unification, tighter budgets, more expensive weapons platforms, and the Cold War all significantly altered the civil-military relationship in America. These factors plus the creation of an independent Air Force further intensified the long-standing competition between the services for scarce allocations. All branches were confronted with the need to hone their arguments, bolster their cases, and perfect their “sales pitches.” The defense allocation process, indeed, came more and more to resemble modern advertising. Inter-service budget competition, previously a matter to be decided behind closed doors, in smoke-filled rooms, became increasingly publicized. The argument the Navy presented to the House Armed Services Committee in October 1949 was incongruent, emotional, and based primarily on refuting the Air Force’s position. On the other hand, the Air Force argument was coherent and polished. Simultaneously, however, senior Air Force officials relied heavily on an inadequately tested theory of air power as the foundation of national defense. In fact, the Air Force strategic bombing doctrine was found wanting in significant areas after the results of both the European and Pacific Theaters in World War II had been assessed; yet few of its senior leaders acknowledged its flaws.⁵ Additionally, the Navy’s amateur public relations effort in 1949 appear to be rooted in a lack of institutional understanding. An inability to understand the primacy of public opinion regarding budget battles in the newly formed Department of

Defense was the Navy's crucial error during the revolt of the admirals. The Navy, in short, failed to perceive and effectively respond to the new rules of the game.

What is the significance of the revolt of the admirals a half century later? If one were to assume that the Navy and Air Force had resolved the conflict over roles and missions in 1949, then there would be little significance to this study. However, conflicts still arise over missions and budgets, and the public relations competition, which spurred the revolt, survives to this day. Historical investigation broadens understanding. The advantage of hindsight allows for a survey of the revolt, its causes, and its consequences in a more measured and dispassionate fashion than was possible 50 years ago. In doing so, some insight may be gained for contending with future service funding and roles and missions debates.

In this investigation, it is necessary to first present the historical background and pertinent facts surrounding the revolt. In so doing, the changes to the national defense organization and decision making process marked by the National Defense Act of 1947 and amendments of 1949 will first be discussed. Next, the Navy and the Air Force cases will be presented. Third, pertinent testimony during the revolt and the public reaction as reported by the popular press will be examined. The final section will be a discussion of the consequences of the outcome of the revolt of the admirals.

Notes

¹ Jeffrey G. Barlow, *Revolt of the Admirals: The Fight for Naval Aviation, 1945-1950* (Washington: Naval Historical Center, 1994), 2.

² Barlow argues the opposite is true, however. Due to the "strength and vehemence" of its arguments, he contends in *Revolt of the Admirals*, the Navy convinced the committee that naval aviation had a vital role to play in defense strategy. This paper will show that naval aviation's arguments did little more than to confuse the issue with its disjointed argument. Naval aviation did, and does, play a vital role in defense strategy,

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but what convinced policy makers of that was not the admirals' revolt, but rather the Korean War.

³Paul Y. Hammond, "Super Carriers and B-36 Bombers: Appropriations, Strategy and Politics," in *American Civil-Military Decisions*, ed. Harold Stein (Birmingham, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1963), 493.

⁴ Walter Millis, *Arms and the State* (New York: Twentieth Century Fund, 1958), 231.

⁵ Barlow, *Revolt of the Admirals*, 21.

Chapter 2

Unification and the Cold War

To understand the circumstances surrounding the revolt of the admirals, it is first necessary to establish the historical framework. In November 1943, General George C. Marshall called for postwar unification of the Departments of War and the Navy. His action led to what became known as the “unification debates” and the eventual passage of the National Security Act of 1947.¹

The National Security Act created a unified National Military Establishment, a National Security Council (NSC), Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), and an independent Air Force. The core of the new system was the NSC; comprised of the President, the Secretaries of State, Defense, and representatives from the three services. These civilian officials, advised by the CIA, would present policy recommendations on national security to the President for approval. The military establishment as well as the State Department then could act upon these policies if adopted.²

The military establishment was made up of two distinct parts, the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) and the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD). Strategic plans and command of the military was provided by the JCS, and when there was one, the Chief of Staff to the President. Military administration, on the other hand, was “coordinated” by Secretary of Defense and OSD.³ The Secretary of Defense had limited power. In fact, the

service secretaries, as cabinet members, could go over the Secretary of Defense's head directly to the President if they so desired.⁴ The Secretary of Defense's only significant power was to "supervise and coordinate" budget estimates. In theory, the system was designed to operate as follows. The JCS were to take the policy decisions of the NSC and the President and develop strategic plans to support them. Next, they were to assign logistic and strategic responsibilities to the respective services. Independently, the service departments were to develop their estimates of the required weapons and force levels to meet the assigned responsibilities. The three departmental budget estimates were then to go back for review by the JCS. After waste and duplication were eliminated, the results were to represent a strictly military estimate of the minimum requirements for support of national objectives. This overall budget estimate was then reviewed by the Secretary of Defense before presentation to the President.⁵

The system, as originally implemented, had recognized flaws. First, the NSC did not provide adequate policy guidance to the JCS.⁶ Secondly, unity of command, one of the prime reasons for unification in the first place, was weakened by the procedure that allowed the service secretaries to appeal directly to the President and bypass the Secretary of Defense.⁷ Third, due to service loyalties and rival strategic theories, the JCS were unable to resolve technical differences.⁸

As a result, on 10 August 1949, an amendment to the National Security Act of 1949 was signed into law. There were three pertinent changes to the law. First, the National Military Establishment was superseded by a Department of Defense (DOD), which was to have unqualified "direction, authority, and control" over national security. Secondly, the service secretaries were removed from the NSC and their bailiwicks were

downgraded from “executive” to “military” departments. Third, the position of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS) was officially established as a non-voting member of the JCS. The CJCS was responsible for presiding over the JCS and was made a statutory advisor to the NSC.⁹ The “unification act” of 1947 and its subsequent amendments were to establish a more efficient system of national security, but at the time of the revolt of the admirals, there were significant misunderstandings of how the system was to operate.

The misunderstandings ran deepest in the Navy. Naval leadership failed to recognize the influence the Secretary of Defense could have on budget and strategy matters. As John C. Ries surmises in his work *Management of Defense*, Secretary of Defense Louis A. Johnson exercised his power completely.¹⁰ This exercise was illustrated by two acts. Within one month of assuming duties, he instituted “Consolidation Directive No. 1,” implementing what was widely interpreted as a gag order on the military.¹¹ The Navy’s failure to silence internal critics of unification created serious repercussions with Johnson. For example, he voiced his displeasure and stated that he wanted to “knock some heads together” after Captain John G. Crommelin made statements to the press criticizing unification.¹² Secondly, Johnson’s decision to cancel the proposed carrier *United States* on 23 April 1949, without consulting either Secretary of the Navy John L. Sullivan or the Chief of Naval Operations (CNO) Louis E. Denfeld,¹³ was a clear example of the Navy’s miscalculation of the new Secretary of Defense’s willingness to wield power. The Navy also misinterpreted the function of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. General Omar N. Bradley, appointed as the first CJCS in August, charged the Navy with insubordination and disloyalty during the revolt. As General Bradley said

in his testimony, “when he stood against the Navy,” it was because, he believed, “the Navy was wrong,” not because he was prejudiced against their ideas.¹⁴ With the inter-service conflicts raging in the Pentagon, the changing strategic environment of the late 1940’s heightened national security concerns further.

The wartime alliance between the west and the Soviets showed unmistakable rifts even prior to the defeat of Nazi Germany, and by 1946 Churchill referred ominously to an “iron curtain” separating eastern from Western Europe. A year later, Truman’s doctrine committing the U.S. to oppose the spread of communism was promulgated.¹⁵ For American defense planners, however, the crucial event in the opening stage of the Cold War occurred in September 1949 when U.S. intelligence surmised that the Soviet Union had tested an atomic weapon. This event served to focus domestic attention on national security during the fall of 1949.¹⁶ The Navy’s misgivings and misunderstandings regarding service unification coupled with heightened Congressional and public awareness of security concerns raised the ante significantly in the inter service squabbling of the fall of 1949.

Notes

¹ Barlow, *Revolt of the Admirals*, 22.

² Millis, *Arms and the State*, 178.

³ Ibid., 179-180.

⁴ John C. Ries, *Management of Defense; Organization and Control of the U.S. Armed Services* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1964), 145-6. Also Public Law 253, 80th Congress, Session 1 (1947), National Security Act of 1947, Section 202. In point of fact, the right was enumerated in Section 202: “Nothing herein contained shall prevent the Secretary of the Army, the Secretary of the Navy, or the Secretary of the Air Force from presenting to the President or to the Director of the Budget, after first so informing the Secretary of Defense, any report or recommendation relating to his department which he may deem necessary.

⁵ Millis, *Arms and the State*, 179-180.

⁶ Paul Y. Hammond, *Organizing for Defense: the American Military Establishment in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1961) 161-5.

Notes

Hammond argues that the JCS had no policy guidance from the NSC on strategy development until the Korean War. As a result, the JCS were left to develop their own.⁷

⁷ Ries, *Management of Defense*, 146.

⁸ Millis, *Arms and the State*, 182-3.

⁹ Ibid., 233. See also Ries, *Management of Defense*, 144. Ries points out that the amendment changed the synonym of unification from “coordination” of the armed forces to “centralization” under the Secretary of Defense.

¹⁰ Ries, *Management of Defense*, 144. He also argues that Johnson’s idea of an executive was someone who gave orders, and those orders were carried out immediately and without question. When the naval officers had the audacity to question his decisions on weapons and strategy (Such as the cancellation of the flush deck carrier), he took that as a sign of unparalleled insubordination. This could explain the animosity he felt for the Navy at the time of the admiral’s revolt.

¹¹ Captain Paul R. Schratz, “The Admirals’ Revolt,” *Proceedings* 112, no.2 (February 1986): 65.

¹² Ibid., 65.

¹³ Ibid., 65.

¹⁴ “The Incorrigible and Indomitable,” *Time* 27, no. 18 (31 October 1949): 14.

¹⁵ John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1982), 3-53. Gaddis discusses at length the origins of the Cold War as well as containment policy.

¹⁶ Ernest K. Lindley, “The Atomic Timetable,” *Newsweek* 34, no. 15 (10 October, 1949): 29. See also “Atoms? Please pass the Baseball,” *Newsweek* 34, no. 16 (17 October 1949): 23.

Chapter 3

Doctrine

Air Force Doctrine

By 1949, Air Force doctrine was committed exclusively to strategic bombing. This doctrine found its origins with Giulio Douhet, Billy Mitchell, and Hugh Trenchard. The Air Corps Tactical School (ACTS) expanded on the principles of Douhet laid down in his work *Command of the Air* to develop Army Air Corps doctrine in the inter-war period.¹

Two Douhetian concepts accepted unequivocally by the newly established U.S. Air Force were the “battleplane” and that “auxiliary aviation is worthless, superfluous, and harmful.”² Douhet contended, and the U.S. Air Force accepted, that the only way to succeed in a war of the future was to launch massive air offensives with the intention of “crushing the material and moral resistance of the enemy.”³ This could only be done by establishing an independent Air Force made up of a preponderance of battle units, or battleplanes. The battleplane should have the speed and radius of action equal to a combat (fighter) aircraft and possess the necessary self-protection capability.⁴ The B-36 bomber entered service on 8 August 1946,⁵ as the Air Force’s most recent attempt at producing the battleplane. The idea that no aircraft should be diverted for secondary purposes, “such as auxiliary aviation, local air defense, and antiaircraft defense”⁶ was evident in Air Force spending patterns. Service priorities underscored the premise that the

battleplane concept was the key to future warfare. Less than six percent of the Air Force budget from 1947-1949 was devoted to the research and development of fighter aircraft.⁷

Additionally, in the Air Force Fiscal Year 1950 budget, 713 million dollars, fully half the sum allocated to purchasing aircraft, was committed to new heavy bombers. The remaining half was split between light bombers, transports, trainers, and fighters.⁸

Expanding upon Douhet's ideas, the ACTS developed the "industrial web theory" that rested on five principles. They were:

1. Great powers rely on industrial and economic systems.
2. There are critical points within those systems that can be bombed.
3. Massed air strikes can penetrate air defenses without unacceptable losses.
4. Victory through air power can be achieved.
5. If enemy resistance persists, it may be necessary to attack the "national will" by attacking cities.⁹

Despite the fact that *The United States Strategic Bombing Surveys* found strategic bombing moderately effective at best in both major theaters of war, senior Air Force officials blamed failures on inadequate resources and efforts diverted to support surface operations.¹⁰ In spite of these considerable flaws in doctrine, the Air Force contended that it was validated after the atomic bombs were dropped on Japan. Moreover, rationale for an independent Air Force relied heavily on the theory that a strategic bomber force could win wars cheaply and autonomously. For these two reasons, World War II was considered by some air power enthusiasts, to be an aberration, at least in so far as updating doctrine was concerned.¹¹ The Air Force was totally committed to the strategic bombing doctrine developed prior to World War II, and with the B-36 bomber as its battleplane to deliver atomic bombs, victory could be, it claimed, achieved without large U.S. manpower losses.

A seventy group Air Force with the B-36 as the backbone of the strategic bomber force was considered essential to national defense by Secretary of the Air Force W. Stuart Symington.¹² Even though the B-36 was never able to achieve its 10,000 nautical mile range capability, the procedure of in-flight refueling apparently made this failure less of a critical design flaw.¹³ The now-common procedure of in flight refueling was demonstrated in a circumnavigation of the globe by an Air Force B-50 in March 1949. The main Air Force argument in support of the B-36, compared to the proposed carrier *United States*, was cost, both in lives and money. Through some convincing, albeit creative, calculations published in *Reader's Digest*, Air Force advocates contended that the cost of one super carrier and its task force was equal to 500 B-36s and exposed 242 times as many men to danger.¹⁴ In sum, nuclear weapons validated strategic bombing doctrine, the Air Force surmised, and the B-36 could do the job for a fraction of the cost of any other weapons platform. And as Jeffrey Barlow notes in *Revolt of the Admirals*, Air Force arguments rested on three themes. First, air power had become the nation's dominant military force. Second, the Air Force was the only proper exponent of air power. Third, strategic bombardment was the most important function of an air force.¹⁵

The Navy opposed the Air Force theory on a future war and its concept of the "strategic air offensive."¹⁶ Furthermore, the Navy argued that there were severe limitations to strategic bombing, and the Air Force reliance on nuclear capability was both costly and immoral.¹⁷

Navy Doctrine

By 1949, the Navy had developed a comprehensive doctrine for force-projection via naval aviation. The center of this doctrine was the aircraft carrier. After the surprise

attack by the Japanese on Pearl Harbor, the aircraft carrier supplanted the battleship as the Navy's capital ship. Fortunately, the carrier, together with its air wing, provided tremendous flexibility, and by the end of the war, naval aviation had proven itself in a variety of missions. These missions, broadly termed "strike" included attacking enemy convoys, providing air support to amphibious operations, bombing coastal logistics bases, and strategic bombing of inland targets.¹⁸ Seek and destroy missions against enemy surface forces, coupled with submarine attacks cut off the Japanese sea lines of communication to such an extent that their logistic system was crippled by 1944.¹⁹ Both fighter and close support for amphibious operations, starting with the landings on Guadalcanal on 7 August 1942, were critical to both prongs of the advance through the Pacific.²⁰ The attack by thirty waves of carrier planes against the well-protected logistical base of Truk in February 1944 illustrated the flexibility and lethality of the carrier.²¹ The bombing missions by carrier planes against Japanese airfields located inland on Formosa demonstrated the strategic bombing capability of the Navy.²²

For carrier air power to operate effectively, it was necessary to organize into carrier task forces. Since the carrier could not operate independently, the task force was designed to not only support, but to defend the capital ship. The mobility provided by this group of ships strengthened its defensive capability. The integration of surface and carrier forces was crucial to the success of any naval campaign.²³

The results of the *Strategic Bombing Survey* in the Pacific War validated many of the tenets of naval aviation. The Secretary of War commissioned the survey on 3 November 1944 as directed by then President Roosevelt, to conduct an "impartial and expert study" on the aerial war over Germany. On 15 August 1945, President Harry S. Truman ordered

a similar study of all effects of air attack against Japan to “establish a basis for evaluating air power as an instrument of military strategy.”²⁴ The authors of the survey, all civilians, were neither Air Force nor Navy supporters. Their conclusions, however, bore a striking resemblance to naval aviation doctrine as it had evolved during the war. The survey concluded with five “signposts” on future uses of air power. They were:

1. Control of the air is an essential ingredient to any surface action.
2. Control of the air necessitates the coordinated effects of ground, sea, and air forces.
3. Air control does not equate to total denial of the air to the enemy.
4. There are limitations in the ability of aircraft to effect the outcome of a surface action.
5. An enemy’s sustaining resources can be depleted by “sustained and accurate attack against carefully selected targets.”²⁵

Historically, the Navy accepted the need for service unification in the field but not in departmental organization.²⁶ It saw centralized control of the military and the establishment of an independent Air Force as a threat to unity of command. If the Air Force controlled all aviation assets,²⁷ the Navy concluded, it would lose the aviation support necessary for surface naval actions.

As Captain Arleigh A. Burke, a future CNO, explained in October 1949, America is a maritime nation. Therefore, protection of sea lines and the capability to project power from the sea were absolute necessities to national defense. Moreover, the only way to achieve this “command of the sea” was through a strong Navy.²⁸ World War II established the aircraft carrier, and the capabilities of its air wing, as the strength, and the future, of the Navy. Even though the war in the Pacific was unique, naval aviation doctrine as it evolved in that theater of operations, served as the foundation for the future. As Vincent Davis astutely notes in his work *The Admiral’s Lobby*, the Navy recognized the dangers of their “rigid, narrow, and absolutist thinking” prior to World War II.²⁹ As a

result, post World War II service doctrine could be described in one word—flexibility.³⁰

This flexibility could only be guaranteed by constructing larger carrier bombers, improving carrier and task force defense, and acquiring the capability to deliver nuclear weapons from a sea based platform.³¹ Leaders in naval aviation considered the proposed carrier *United States* the future of the Navy's offensive striking power, and the versatility it provided would be an asset to all of the services.³² The Navy claimed naval aviation itself as tactical support for the strategic mission of “command of the sea,” and they considered the functions of the new carrier to be cooperative with the Air Force, not a rival.³³ More widely accepted and reported in the popular press, however, was the notion that the *United States* was nothing more than the “Navy’s bid for a chance at the Air Force’s strategic bombing role.”³⁴ The keel was laid for the *United States* on 18 April 1949 and held the hopes of the future of naval aviation.³⁵

The “flush deck” design of the *United States* originated with the requirement to launch and recover aircraft of 100,000 pounds. The 65,000-ton ship was to be over 1000 feet long, without an island, and of a radical new design.³⁶ The 189 million-dollar price tag was high, but the Navy contended the price was worth the contribution to national defense. The Air Force and government decision-makers did not agree, however, and the big ship was cancelled. A majority of the JCS maintained that the super carrier’s main function would be a duplication of the primary role of the Air Force.³⁷

United States' cancellation on 23 April 1949 marked the beginning of a major onslaught on Navy funding. The fiscal constraints placed on the military in the late 1940’s were severe, and plans debated in the summer of 1949 for the Fiscal Year 1951 budget called for deep cuts in naval aviation. Operational Essex Class carriers were to be

reduced from eight to four, Carrier Air Wings from fourteen to six, operational Saipan Class carriers from ten to eight, Marine Squadrons from twenty three to twelve, Anti Submarine Warfare Squadrons from eight to seven, and Patrol Squadrons from thirty to twenty.³⁸ While the Navy was struggling to maintain its carrier fleet, the Air Force was pushing for a seventy-group bomber force. By the time of the revolt, the Air Force appeared to have gained substantial support that they could provide more armed strength for less cost. This concept, later dubbed as “more bang for the buck,” hurt the Navy’s chances of getting to improve their carrier force. The Navy maintained its aviation assets were being cut to save money to pay for Air Force big bombers.³⁹

Notes

¹Giulio Douhet, *The Command of the Air*, translated by Dino Ferrari (Washington, D.C.: Office of Air Force History, 1983). Douhet is the recognized as the first to advance the theory that air power alone could win a war. See also Barlow, *Revolt of the Admirals*, 21.

² Douhet, *Command of the Air*, 101.

³ Ibid., 128.

⁴ Ibid., 117.

⁵ Barlow, *Revolt of the Admirals*, 148.

⁶ Douhet, *Command of the Air*, 128.

⁷ Schratz, “The Admirals’ Revolt,” 66.

⁸ *Aviation Week* 50, No. 20, (16 May 1949): 12-13.

⁹ Major H. Dwight Griffin, et al., “Air Corps Tactical School: the Untold Story,” (Air Command and Staff College Research Paper, 1995), 17.

¹⁰ Barlow, *Revolt of the Admirals*, 21.

¹¹ Carl H. Builder, *The Icarus Syndrome; the Role of Air Power Theory in the Evolution and Fate of the U.S. Air Force* (New Brunswick, MA: Transaction Publications, 1994), 133-144.

¹² Lt Gen Glenn W. Martin, transcript of oral history interview by Lt Cols V.H. Gallagher and H.N. Ahmann, 16 February 1977. Typed transcript, K239.0512-601 C.1, in USAF Collection, AFHRA, 28-32.

¹³ Norman Friedman, *The Postwar Naval Revolution* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1986), 18-19. The figures that Friedman refers to in his arguments are taken from *Air Force Standard Characteristics Charts*. The B-36, originally designed to fly above 40,000 feet, have a 5000 nautical mile combat radius and carry a 10,000 pound bomb load, never quite reached those range capabilities.

Notes

¹⁴ Francis V. Drake, “The Case for Land Based Aircraft,” *Reader’s Digest* 54, no. 324 (May 1949): 59-66.

¹⁵ Barlow, *Revolt of the Admirals*, 51.

¹⁶ Norman Friedman, *U.S. Aircraft Carriers* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1983), 19.

¹⁷ Barlow, *Revolt of the Admirals*, 105-130.

¹⁸ Friedman, *The Postwar Naval Revolution*, 84-110.

¹⁹ *United States Strategic Bombing Survey: Pacific War* (Maxwell AFB, AL: Air University Press, 1987), 72-5. Hereafter cited as *USSBS*.

²⁰ *USSBS*, 58-9. General Douglas MacArthur led the first prong, from Port Moresby toward northern New Guinea, and the other, from Guadalcanal up the Soloman Islands, was directed by Admiral Chester Nimitz. Throughout the survey, air support for amphibious operations are stressed as a critical factor.

²¹ Ronald H. Spector, *Eagle Against the Sun* (New York: Vintage Books, 1985), 271-2.

²² Fletcher Pratt, “The Case for the Aircraft Carrier,” *Reader’s Digest* 54, No. 324 (May 1949): 58.

²³ Ibid., 56.

²⁴ *USSBS*, 46.

²⁵ Ibid., 108-110.

²⁶ Hammond, *Organizing for Defense*, 196-203.

²⁷ Vincent Davis, *The Admiral’s Lobby* (Durham, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1967), 32.

²⁸ House Committee on Armed Services, *The National Defense Program-Unification and Strategy*, 82nd Congress, 1st Session, 6-21 October 1949, 255-8. Hereafter cited as *Hearings*.

²⁹ Davis, *The Admiral’s Lobby*, 204.

³⁰ Ibid., 206.

³¹ Friedman, *Postwar Naval Revolution*, 18-19, 84-110.

³² *Hearings*, 259.

³³ Fletcher Pratt, “The Case for the Aircraft Carrier,” 53-58, see also Davis, *The Admiral’s Lobby*, in chapter titled “Organization, Technology, and Strategy.”

³⁴ “Victory Role,” *Time* 53, no. 18 (2 May 1949): 17.

³⁵ “Scuttling a Dream Boat,” *Newsweek* 33, no. 18 (2 May 1949): 17-18.

³⁶ Friedman, *U.S. Aircraft Carriers*, 240-241.

³⁷ “Carrier Off-Sullivan Quits,” *Aviation Week* 50, no. 18 (2 May 1949): 7.

³⁸ “Statements in Navy Presentation,” *Army and Navy Journal* 87, no. 7 (15 October 1949): 166.

³⁹ Hammond, “Super Carriers and B-36 Bombers,” 483.

Chapter 4

Leadership and Public Relations

The Navy

Leadership

Individual personalities, as well as doctrinal differences, played major roles in the inter-service clash of 1949. When the National Security Act of 1947 was signed, Navy Secretary James V. Forrestal became the first Secretary of Defense, and John L. Sullivan was promoted within the Navy Department to the Secretary.¹ When Forrestal resigned on health grounds, the ambitious, politically motivated Louis A. Johnson became Secretary of Defense on 28 March 1949.² In contrast to Forrestal, Johnson was a staunch Air Force supporter and patron of the big bomber program.³ When the *United States* was cancelled less than one month later, Secretary of the Navy Sullivan resigned in protest and was replaced by Francis P. Matthews. Sullivan wrote a stinging letter to Johnson upon his resignation stating his conviction that the Secretary of Defense's action was the first attempt in American history to "prevent the development of a powerful weapon." He also stated his concern that the Marine Corps and naval aviation were to be eliminated.⁴ Matthews, in stark contrast to Sullivan, had little government experience and knew even less of the Navy. Upon taking office, he cheerily admitted "he had never commanded

anything bigger than a rowboat.”⁵ Additionally, he was hand-picked by Secretary Johnson and owed his allegiance to his superior.⁶ The civilian leadership within the Defense Department thus seemed to have an Air Force bias, and the leadership in uniform was no more encouraging from the Navy’s perspective.

In March of 1949, Admiral William Leahy retired as military Chief of Staff to the President and leader of the JCS. In the interim, retired General Dwight D. Eisenhower served unofficially in this capacity.⁷ (The JCS did not gain a statutory Chairman until the amendment to the National Security Act was implemented, and General Omar N. Bradley was appointed to the post in early August 1949.⁸) As a result, the JCS was a three-man body from March to August of 1949 with Admiral Louis A. Denfeld, the Chief of Naval Operations (CNO), as the senior member. As such, he was required to report decisions made by the JCS. One such decision was the order forbidding an intercept exercise pitting a Navy F2H-1 Banshee against an Air Force B-36 on the grounds that there were too many variables to gain useful information from the outcome.⁹ This “decision,” directed by Secretary Johnson but announced in a message signed by Admiral Denfeld, made some in the Navy question the CNO’s loyalties. Additionally, his support of unification, unlike many other naval officers, and his conciliatory nature,¹⁰ were perceived by some as signs of weakness.

Within the Navy, Admiral Arthur W. Radford was looked upon as the champion of its aviation. Until May 1949, when he was assigned as Commander in Chief Pacific Fleet, Admiral Radford was the Vice Chief of Naval Operations and the senior naval aviator in Washington D.C. Even after leaving the Pentagon, he remained the chief spokesman for the Navy throughout the revolt of the admirals.¹¹ Two perceptions by Naval Officers of

effective leadership existed at the time. Later described by Captain Crommelin, they can not be discounted. First of all, the best officers proved themselves in operational command billets and should remain in those types of assignments. Secondly, there was an institutional distrust of the “general staff” system implemented after service unification.¹² From a naval aviator’s viewpoint, the senior leadership in the military was dismal. The Secretary of Defense was a strong Air Force spokesman, the Secretary of the Navy lacked the experience to oppose his policies, and the CNO was considered to be weak. The only true advocate of naval aviation, Admiral Radford, had been shipped to Hawaii, away from the debates raging in Washington in the stormy months of mid-1949.

Public Relations

To make matters worse, and due to the Navy’s tendency to favor covert approaches¹³ to public relations, their efforts during the revolt were widely perceived to be deceitful and underhanded. Vincent Davis offers three explanations why the Navy relied on ad hoc public relations agencies. First, some naval leaders believed covert agencies were more effective than the official Navy public relations organizations. When Forrestal was the Navy Secretary, he established a reliance on these covert organizations. As John G. Norris surmised in the *Washington Post*, Forrestal’s “Committee of Research on Reorganization,” known as “Scorer” was the first such Navy organization. Scorer was set up immediately following World War II to promote the Navy’s views on unification.¹⁴ Second, when pressures from the Defense Department made it impossible for overt agencies to operate, such as in 1949 as a result of Johnson’s Consolidated Directive #1, only the behind-the-scenes groups could operate effectively. Johnson’s directive, aimed at curtailing the “tit-for-tat” public relations battle that was raging in the defense

establishment, set forth new public information policies including a provision that all statements by retired and active duty personnel must first be reviewed by the Office of the Secretary of Defense.¹⁵ This “gag order” left the Navy few avenues to present their case. Third, and most important, naval officers generally had a “strong disinclination to engage in anything resembling politics” making overt agencies weak or passive.¹⁶

The Organizational Policy and Research Division of the Office of the Chief of Naval Operations (OP-23) spearheaded the Navy’s public relations efforts. Officially, OP-23 was to “familiarize itself on all matters pertaining to unification” and advise the CNO and other senior officers on those matters.¹⁷ Established on 23 December 1948 and considered by the press to have grown out of the old Scorer organization, OP-23 was headed by the highly respected Captain Arleigh A. Burke and supported by a staff of eleven officers and seventeen enlisted men. It was often perceived to be obstructing unification rather than supporting it as called for in its charter.¹⁸ The *New York Times* reported that there was a perception that OP-23 was “going beyond” its official purpose of unification compliance.¹⁹ It was described by *Newsweek* as the Navy’s “underground propaganda machine” and charged with seeking to destroy the Air Force B-36 bomber program.²⁰ Likewise, the *Washington Post* reported the Air Force view that OP-23 was nothing more than a “propaganda outfit set up to fight unification, strategic bombing, and the B-36.”²¹ OP-23 from its inception enjoyed little credibility as a public relations organization. Located adjacent to the Office of Naval Investigation and not given the freedom to openly interact with the press, the organization took on an air of secrecy.

Some inappropriate material allegedly was leaked by OP-23, such as the highly critical pamphlet entitled “The Strategic Bombing Myth.” While it was never ascertained

if the pamphlet was authored by OP-23, Secretary Symington correctly surmised that the Navy used the document to frame its arguments before Congress.²² Symington dubbed the pamphlet the “second anonymous document,” and the Air Force immediately countered with a fifty page rebuttal to the claims in “The Strategic Bombing Myth.” James G. Stahlman, publisher of the *Nashville Banner* and a reserve Navy Captain, stated there was nothing “secret” or “anonymous” about “The Strategic Bombing Myth,” and he sent copies to newspapers around the country.²³ The pamphlet was quoted in the popular press as representing the results of *The United States Strategic Bombing Surveys*. However, according to Mr. Franklin D’Olier, the Chairman of the survey committee, much of the material was taken out of context, and in general appeared to “paint a picture diametrically opposed to the findings of the survey.”²⁴ OP-23’s use of such a questionable document damaged the Navy’s credibility before the House Armed Services Committee in October 1949. Furthermore, Commander Thomas B. Davies, who had previously served as Burke’s deputy at OP-23, discredited the organization when he was directly linked with the original “anonymous document.” This document made accusations that the Air Force B-36 program was corrupt, and its appearance served as the catalyst for the hearings before Congress on unification.²⁵

The Navy, confident of the validity of their doctrine and the need for the super carrier *United States*, was in a confused state in the summer and fall of 1949. Naval leadership and public relations were incongruent and unorganized facing the strategy and budget debates of the modern era.

The Air Force

Leadership

In contrast, the Air Force possessed strong, unified leadership, and perhaps more importantly, “sold” its plan to the American people better than the Navy. The first Secretary of the Air Force, W. Stuart Symington, served as the Assistant Secretary of War for Air during World War II. He led the newly independent Air Force with an unwavering enthusiasm and commitment. The Chief of Staff of the Air Force during the revolt of the admirals was General Hoyt S. Vandenberg.²⁶ The strength of Air Force leadership was total congruence. Secretary Symington and General Vandenberg, as well as their subordinates supported one another fully, and there appeared to be no “cracks” in the chain of command. Furthermore, the Air Force from its inception, unlike the Navy, tied its independence to overall service unification and a Department of Defense.²⁷ As a result, it supported any unification effort and normally came across as the “reasonable” actor in the conflict with the Navy. Finally, this image, the Air Force promoted quite readily and effectively through a superb public relations campaign.

Public Relations

The origins of the sophisticated Air Force self-promotion effort can be traced to pre-service unification days. Preaching the aircraft represented a new all-purpose military weapons system, air officers threw off the traditional restraints that fettered Army and Navy Officers, and fought for their ideology with “zeal, enthusiasm, and the fiercest sort of civilian lobby.”²⁸ The outspoken Air Force protagonist Symington made him the logical public relations leader within the young service. By the spring of 1949, the Air Force public relations machine had matured into an extremely effective tool garnering

support both in Congress and with the American people. The service perfected the art of public relations announcements. For example, it was careful to be completely straightforward and officially stress only the documentable operational impact of Air Force achievements. However, if an unofficial source released inflated Air Force capabilities, there would not be any denial. If a Navy achievement was inflated in the press, though, the Air Force immediately jumped on the inaccuracy.²⁹ Additionally, timing was critical, and in March, the Air Force pulled off a major public relations coup. The around-the-world flight of the B-50 using in-flight refueling techniques, the announced ability to strike seventy strategic targets in the USSR, and the claim that the B-36 exceeded designed capabilities all served to dilute the impact of the Navy's concurrent amphibious exercises in the Caribbean.³⁰ These subtle efforts had the effect of securing support for Air Force arguments, as was illustrated by the views of Representative Clarence Cannon, Chairman of the House Appropriations Committee, when justifying the cancellation of the carrier *United States*. "We must hit within one week after the war starts and it can be done only by land-based planes such as we now have."³¹

Throughout the late 1940's, the Air Force could count on significant support in periodical literature. Through the efforts of biased air power supporters the likes of William Bradford Huie and Alexander de Seversky, the Air Force case was stated succinctly and forcefully. Articles by two air power enthusiasts published in the most widely read magazine in America, *Reader's Digest*, in the spring of 1949, were very persuasive promotions for the Air Force's strategic bombing role. Seversky, an aviator himself and author of *Victory Through Air Power*, gained notoriety when he narrated the

Disney propaganda movie of the same name during World War II.³² Huie, a Navy Officer in World War II, wrote *The Case Against the Admirals*, published in 1948. Huie's arguments were not particularly compelling and did not receive the official support he was seeking from the Air Force, but his work nonetheless painted the Navy as the sole source of resistance to unification.³³ The articles in *Reader's Digest*, however, were indeed so convincing (and accurate) that there were claims that the Air Force not only leaked the information, but actually helped write them. The claims against the Air Force were never proven. However, the credibility and sophistication of the Air Force public relations machine led the Navy to draw the conclusion that the rules were being broken.³⁴ In sum, the Air Force mounted a large-scale public relations campaign, which was to pay dividends in the summer prior to the revolt.

Notes

¹ Hammond, “Super Carriers and B-36 Bombers,” 483.

² Schratz, “The Admirals’ Revolt,” 65.

³ Commander Edward P. Stafford, USN, “Saving Carrier Aviation-1949 Style,” *Proceedings* 116, no. 1 (January 1990): 50.

⁴ *Hearings*, 623.

⁵ “Revolt of the Admiral’s,” *Time* 54, no. 16 (17 October 1949): 23.

⁶ Schratz, “The Admirals’ Revolt,” 66.

⁷ Millis, *Arms and the State*, 231.

⁸ Stafford, “Saving Carrier Aviation-1949 Style,” 48.

⁹ *Hearings*, 611.

¹⁰ “Storm Over the Pentagon,” *Newsweek* 34, no. 16 (17 October 1949): 25.

¹¹ “Revolt of the Admirals,” 22.

¹² Stafford, “Saving Carrier Aviation-1949 Style,” 47.

¹³ Davis, *The Admiral’s Lobby*, 280. Davis reasons that the Navy had a long standing distrust of self promoting officers, and “the ideal officer was one who was soft spoken and retiring (especially in public).”

¹⁴ John G. Norris, “Sherman Ends OP-23 Unit,” *Washington Post*, 4 November 1949.

¹⁵ Keith D. McFarland, “The 1949 Revolt of the Admirals,” *Parameters* 11, no. 2 (June 1981): 56.

¹⁶ Davis, *The Admiral’s Lobby*, 284-5.

¹⁷ Barlow, *Revolt of the Admirals*, 168.

¹⁸ Norris, “Sherman Ends OP-23 Unit,” *Washington Post*, 4 November 1949.

Notes

¹⁹ Harold B. Hinton, "Sherman Puts End to Operation 23," *New York Times*, 4 November 1949. It is interesting to note that several press reports incorrectly refer to OP-23 as "Operation 23."

²⁰ "Navy Operation 23," *Newsweek* 34, no. 20 (14 November 1949): 29.

²¹ Norris, "Sherman Ends OP-23 Unit," *Washington Post*, 4 November 1949.

²² "Navy Berates USAF Concept of Air Power," *Aviation Week* 51, no. 16 (24 October 1949): 12.

²³ John G. Norris, "Symington Reaffirms B-36 Faith, Hits Critics," *Washington Post*, 19 October 1949.

²⁴ *Hearings*, 406.

²⁵ Hammond, "Super Carriers and B-36 Bombers," 508-511, 539-543.

²⁶ Martin oral history, 28-32.

²⁷ Hammond, *Organizing for Defense*, 196.

²⁸ Davis, *Admirals Lobby*, 215-6.

²⁹ Martin oral history. See also Barlow, *Revolt of the Admirals*, 44-52, and Hammond, "Super Carriers and B-36 Bombers," 543. Martin realized that Symington obviously had a keen sense when it came to public relations, and both Barlow and Hammond come to the same conclusion.

³⁰ Hammond, "Super Carriers and B-36 Bombers," 491.

³¹ "Air Force Knocks out Navy's Super Carrier," *Life* 26, no. 18 (2 May 1949): 47.

³² Seversky, "Peace Through Air Power," 18-26.

³³ William Bradford Huie, *The Case Against the Admirals; Why We Must Have a Unified Command* (New York: E.P. Dutton and Co., Inc., 1946).

³⁴ Martin oral history, 31. See also Alexander de Seversky, "Peace Through Air Power," *Reader's Digest* 54, no. 322 (February 1949): 18-26 and William Bradford Huie, "Why We Must Have the World's Best Air Force," *Reader's Digest* 54, no. 323 (March 1949): 27-31.

Chapter 5

The Revolt of the Admirals

The Anonymous Document and the Agenda

Several individuals were frustrated by the fact that the Air Force press campaign claiming strategic bombing as the “ultimate component” of national defense had, for the most part, gone unanswered by the Navy. One such individual was the special assistant to Under Secretary of the Navy Dan A. Kimball, Mr. Cedric Worth. In May 1949, Worth released two copies of an “anonymous document” to Mr. Glenn Martin and Representative James E. Van Zandt, a member of the House Armed Services Committee. This highly explosive document made claims of serious improprieties in the B-36 program, and cited 55 allegations of wrongdoing in its procurement by Secretary Johnson and Secretary Symington. The anonymous document given to Mr. Van Zandt was the catalyst for the Hearings before the House Armed Services Committee on Unification and Strategy.¹ On 9 June 1949, the following agenda was approved:

1. Establish the truth or falsity of all charges made by Mr. Van Zandt and by all others the committee may find or develop in the investigation.
2. Locate and identify the sources from which the charges, rumors, and innuendoes have come.
3. Examine the performance characteristics of the B-36 bomber to determine whether it is a satisfactory weapon.
4. Examine the roles and missions of the Air Force and Navy (especially Navy Aviation and Marine Aviation) to determine whether or not the decision to cancel the construction of the aircraft carrier United States was sound.

5. Establish whether or not the Air Force is concentrating upon strategic bombing to such an extent as to be injurious to tactical aviation and the development of adequate fighter aircraft and fighter aircraft techniques.
6. Consider the procedures followed by the Joint Chiefs of Staff on the development of weapons to be used by the respective services to determine whether or not it is proposed that two of the three services will be permitted to pass on weapons of the third.
7. Consider all other matters pertinent to the above that may be developed during the course of the investigation.²

The August Hearings

The anonymous document spurred two separate hearings before Congress.³ The first set of hearings, in August, dealt only with the first two items on the agenda, and the Air Force was exonerated of all charges of wrong doing.⁴ When the document first surfaced, Symington wasted no time leading the effort refuting the claims. He considered the document a personal attack, and immediately began writing a rebuttal. This point by point argument eventually became the essence of his testimony before Congress in August 1949. Perhaps more importantly, he appointed W. Barton Leach, a Professor of Law at Harvard and a reserve Air Force Colonel as the “Coordinator-Director” of the Air Force defense team. As a lawyer and operations analyst in World War II, Leach was uniquely qualified for the job.⁵ The hearings took place from 9-12 and 22-25 August, and because of flawless preparation, “no inconsistencies or contradictions capable of exploitation appeared in the testimony.”⁶ On 24 August, the day after the Secretary testified, Mr. Cedric Worth took the stand, and after admitting authorship of the anonymous document, validated Johnson’s claims of innocence in the B-36 procurement process.⁷ With the claims made by the previously anonymous “Worth Document” disproved, the hearings recessed until October 1949.

Due largely to the efforts of retired General Ira Eaker, the Air Force enjoyed the unwavering support of popular aviation magazines. For example, a strongly worded rebuttal of the Worth Document was published in *Aero Digest* in September 1949. Eaker had cultivated a relationship with the publisher of the magazine, Mr. Frank A. Tichener.⁸ In the editorial, Tichener's stated purpose was: "...So that our readers may see the kind of double-crossing that takes the time of our representatives in Washington and wastes the taxpayers money."⁹ After the successful defense of the B-36 program and the lambasting the Navy took in magazines such as *Aero Digest*, the spotlight on the Navy intensified in September 1949.

September

Two significant events in September 1949 fueled the fire of the Air Force-Navy dispute. First, on 10 September, Captain John G. Crommelin, a highly respected combat naval aviator serving on the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), called reporters to his home and attacked unification as a terrible mistake. He stated that the Navy and naval aviation were being "nibbled to death" by the JCS and the Department of Defense. Additionally, he claimed the Navy's fighting spirit was "going to pot."¹⁰ In response to Crommelin's outburst, on 14 September Secretary Matthews issued a statement to senior Naval leadership that stated "officers who wished to express views on the matter should transmit them to him through the appropriate channels."¹¹ Vice Admiral Gerald F. Bogan felt compelled to respond officially to the Matthews statement. The Bogan memorandum, along with endorsements by Admirals Radford and Denfeld as required by Navy procedure, said in essence there was a morale problem throughout the Navy. In what was reported by the *Associated Press* as truly "cloak and dagger" fashion, the second trigger

event of September occurred, when Crommelin released this correspondence to all three wire services, hoping to force Congress to resume the hearings on unification.¹²

Whether or not Captain Crommelin's actions influenced the decision to resume the hearings in October 1949, rather than in January 1950 as was originally intended by the Chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, Representative Carl Vinson, is uncertain.¹³ Regardless, the Navy was to get its day to testify before Vinson's committee to address unification and strategy. The revolt of the admirals had begun.

Testimony

The Navy's case before the House Armed Services Committee was provided by the testimony of twenty-six witnesses from 6-17 October while the Air Force rebutted with only Secretary Symington and General Vandenberg on 18-19 October. The Joints Chiefs of Staff, the Army, and the administration were represented beginning with General Omar N. Bradley on 19 October. The hearings ended on 21 October with the testimony of former President Herbert Hoover.¹⁴

The Navy

Secretary of the Navy Matthews opened the Navy's case. As *Time* observed, "the revolt pushed aside the Navy's civilian head, who had blandly assured the House Armed Services Committee that Navy morale was good," and it went on to describe how Matthews was "treated to loud and sardonic laughter" by the assembled naval aviators.¹⁵ Matthews directly charged Vice Admiral Bogan and Captain Crommelin with "faithlessness" and "insubordination" for their opposition to unification.¹⁶ There was no indication of any coordination between Matthews and the remaining Navy witnesses, but

he did seem to recognize the route the officers were to follow in their testimony. He did not attempt to hide his disdain. The battle lines were drawn, and Matthews came down on the side of Secretary of Defense Johnson, and by extension, the Air Force.

Not only were the naval aviators entering the hearings without the support of their civilian head. CNO Admiral Denfeld was content to sit back and let a subordinate coordinate the efforts of the Navy's case. After all, the CNO had sided with the administration and his peers on the JCS on several contentious issues in the past. The perception that Denfeld supported the decisions to cancel the *United States* and disallow the Banshee and B-36 fly off, whether true or not, was commonly accepted among naval aviators. The admirals' revolt was led by the "brilliant fighting commander" and long "outspoken opponent of unification," Admiral Radford.¹⁷ Radford's testimony focused on the inadequacy of the B-36, and more important, the weaknesses of the "atomic blitz" theory of warfare. Additionally, he addressed the lack of emphasis that the Air Force had paid to tactical and fighter aircraft development.¹⁸

The remainder of the Navy witnesses from 8-11 October supported Radford's testimony on technical grounds. The testimony was well researched and credible with the exception of Commander Eugene Tatum. Tatum presented evidence, based upon the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, that questioned the lethality of nuclear weapons.¹⁹ Even if nothing more destructive than the original weapons were being developed, Tatum's arguments simply were not plausible.

On 12-13 October, the Navy brought in its "big guns." Fleet Admirals Ernest J. King, Chester W. Nimitz, and William F. "Bull" Halsey all testified as did a procession of lower ranking World War II heroes. The specifics of their testimony was not

particularly striking, but they reinforced Radford's views.²⁰ One facet of their testimony was unique and can not be totally discounted. These men enjoyed a certain credibility and respect of the nation due to their heroics in World War II.

The surprise witness for the Navy was Admiral Denfeld. It was expected that the CNO would ally himself with the JCS, of which he was a member, but when he took the stand, he sided with his fellow naval officers. He accused the JCS of making uninformed and “arbitrary” decisions. Everyone present was surprised at Denfeld’s testimony. Naval aviation supporters erupted in applause, Secretary Matthews hurried from the room speechless, and CJCS Bradley tore up his prepared statement in disgust when Denfeld finished speaking.²¹

Navy leadership prior to and during the admiral’s revolt was clearly in disarray. The civilian head of the Navy was in direct opposition to the views of the naval aviators, and the CNO vacillated between his loyalty to the JCS (and unification) and his own service. As a result, the Navy was left to rely on ad hoc leadership in the form of Radford, who no longer was stationed in Washington, D.C., and the efforts of OP-23 to coordinate its efforts. Not unexpectedly, the service’s case was disjointed and unclear.

Due to this leadership void and a poorly presented case, the Navy, it appeared, was losing the case with the people. A Gallup poll conducted on 15 October showed an overwhelming 74% of voters favoring the Air Force role in future war, with only 6% the Army and 4% the Navy.²² Public perception of the Navy’s testimony could be found in a *Newsweek* Magazine article of 17 October. The article argued in direct contrast to Radford’s testimony, and provided evidence from independent observers, that Navy morale was fine. *Newsweek* then summarized the Navy case in telling fashion: “It is

sometimes difficult to figure precisely what the Navy recalcitrants want, however. Sometimes they attack the whole idea of strategic bombing as Admiral Radford did. And sometimes they simply say they can do it better.” Secretary Johnson was also quoted: “ . . . let the Navy airmen sound off. Once they’ve done so, they’ll become reconciled to their new role in national defense.”²³ Johnson’s inference was evidently that the reconciliation would entail the Navy accepting its position as something other than the “first line of defense.” *Air Force Magazine*, an obviously biased publication, did however, frame some pointed questions based upon the Navy’s testimony: “What drives a distinguished group of admirals to denounce strategic bombing while pleading for the means with which to conduct it, to find the A-bomb immoral in the hands of the Air Force but quite moral in the hands of the Navy?”²⁴ *Time* amplified this view. “Even so staunch a friend of the Navy as the *New York Times* Annapolis-trained military analyst Hanson Baldwin wrote that he himself did not consider the cutbacks in the Navy program disastrous.” He added dryly: “Some of the Navy’s interest in morality as applied to strategic bombing seems new-found.”²⁵

General Omar N. Bradley, Chairman Joint Chiefs of Staff

The remainder of the testimony before the House Armed Services Committee further weakened the already faltering Navy position. Of particular note were the arguments of General Bradley. He stated that there would be no need in the future for an island hopping campaign or large amphibious capabilities, and more importantly, strategic bombing was “our first-priority retaliatory weapon.” Bradley made no attempt to hide his contempt for the Navy’s methods during the case, and he directly accused senior naval officers of poor leadership, disloyalty, and being “completely against unity of command

and planning.” As *Time* noted: “From a military standpoint he had all but blasted the Navy admirals’ case. And before the week was out, torpedoed by other non-Navy men, the Navy’s arguments were little more than just afloat.”²⁶

The Air Force

The unquestioned civilian leader of the Air Force, Secretary Symington, presented the Air Force rebuttal, as he had during previous testimony in August. Symington enjoyed the unwavering support of the Chief of Staff of the Air Force (CSAF) Vandenberg. Both men’s testimony was limited in scope and complimentary. Both relied heavily on their testimony of August, which validated the B-36 program and the nation’s commitment to strategic bombing doctrine.²⁷ The congruence of Air Force leadership coupled with a polished presentation cast the Air Force as the reasonable actor during the revolt. As Phillip S. Meilinger notes in his work, *Hoyt S. Vandenberg—The Life of a General*, the CSAF remained cool and levelheaded throughout the revolt of the admirals. In fact, to ensure the rest of the Air Force remained similarly unemotional and out of the spotlight, Vandenberg went so far as to assign press officers to handle all public statements by two of the Air Force’s outspoken members, Generals Curtis LeMay and George Kenney.²⁸

Conclusions

More and more, the Navy was looked upon as a bunch of complainers who were only concerned with their pet programs. It appeared the Navy was simply upset with the realization that it had lost its place as America’s “first line of defense.”²⁹ The Philadelphia *Inquirer* captured the mood, as reported by the popular press, best. “The

Navy brass can contribute to national safety by dropping their guerilla warfare against the other services and endeavor by forthright, constructive criticism to improve on defense strategy.” The Washington *Post* added: “A real meeting of minds can not be achieved until both sides are willing to play on the same team, and right now the burden of proof is on the Navy.”³⁰ And as *Newsweek* concluded, the Navy criticized the “global strategy” worked out by the JCS, but it offered no alternative of its own.³¹ In sum, the Navy’s testimony cast the naval aviators in a shadow of public doubt as to their true intentions. The Navy was making claims that the system was broken but offered no viable solution.

The Navy lost the conflict with the Air Force referred to as the “revolt of the admirals.” They *did not* lose the conflict because their doctrine was weak. In point of fact, naval aviation doctrine, and by extension naval doctrine, was sound and based in principles validated in combat. Likewise, they *did not* lose because Air Force doctrine was particularly sound. Air Force doctrine was neither fully tested nor validated in World War II and contained major flaws in 1949. The Navy *did* lose the battle because of leadership failures and a lack of appreciation for public perceptions in the changing environment of the post unification military.

Notes

¹ Schratz, “The Admiral’s Revolt,” 65.

² *Hearings*, 432-3.

³ Barlow, *Revolt of the Admirals*, 2.

⁴ *Hearings*, 398.

⁵ Martin oral history, 28-32.

⁶ Hammond, “Super Carriers and B-36 Bombers,” 499.

⁷ McFarland, “The 1949 Revolt of the Admirals,” 58-59.

⁸ Correspondence of Lieutenant General Ira Eaker, 1947-1950, 168.7126 (Microfilm 23263), AFHRA. The personal correspondence between Eaker and Tichener was extensive and the two men seemed to develop a friendship over time.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ “Storm Over the Pentagon,” 24.

Notes

¹¹ Barlow, *Revolt of the Admirals*, 236.

¹² “Storm Over the Pentagon,” 24. The important thing to note is that all memorandums such as this one required “endorsements” by superior officers. Therefore, Admirals Radford and Denfeld were required to endorse Vice Admiral Bogan’s memorandum since they were next in his chain of command.

¹³ Hammond, “Super Carriers and B-36 Bombers,” 510.

¹⁴ *Hearings*, iv-v.

¹⁵ “Revolt of the Admirals,” 21.

¹⁶ *Hearings*, 7-10.

¹⁷ “Revolt of the Admirals,” 22.

¹⁸ *Hearings*, 39-132.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 173-175.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 237-343.

²¹ “Revolt of the Admirals,” 21-23 and “Storm Over the Pentagon,” 23-26.

²² Schratz, “The Admirals’ Revolt,” 68.

²³ “Storm Over the Pentagon,” 23-26.

²⁴ “Revolt of the Admirals,” *Air Force* 32, no. 12 (December 1949): 22.

²⁵ “Revolt of the Admirals,” *Time*, 23.

²⁶ “The Incorrigible and Indomitable,” 13.

²⁷ *Hearings*, 397-515.

²⁸ Phillip S. Meilinger, *Hoyt S. Vandenberg—The Life of a General* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1989), 136-137.

²⁹ Huie, “Why We Must Have the World’s Best Air Force,” 27-31. A common theme in most pro-Air Force publications at the time was this reference to the Navy being displaced as the nation’s “first line of defense.”

³⁰ Quoted in *Army Navy Journal* 87, no. 7 (15 October 1949): 166.

³¹ “The Navy: Undress Parade,” *Newsweek* 34, no. 17 (24 October 1949): 24.

Chapter 6

Aftermath

Doctrine

The ten-day parade of senior officers before Congress in October 1949 *did not*, as Jeffrey Barlow and others have contended, “irrevocably turn the tide”¹ in the inter-service debate. The facts remain that the carrier *United States* was not rejuvenated, the B-36 was maintained as the primary strategic bomber,² and most important, strategic bombing doctrine was firmly entrenched as the “first line of defense” against the Soviet Union. The Air Force continued to be the favored service throughout the 1950s due to the emphasis on strategic bombing and nuclear deterrence. As Phillip E. Moseley astutely advocated in *Foreign Affairs* soon after the revolt: “Greater attention must now be given to new weapons of delay and harassment; to short-range tactical air power . . .” Furthermore, he recognized that tactical air power was “nonexistent except for the Navy and Marine arm.”³ When hostilities broke out on the Korean Peninsula, the Navy’s tactical air power was the only aviation asset capable of responding quickly. What decisively saved the postwar Navy, as Vincent Davis notes, was the Korean War.⁴ From a practical standpoint, his point is true. From a doctrinal standpoint, however, the strength and flexibility of the carrier, especially in limited war, were not fully realized during the Korean War. Many contended, especially in the Air Force, that a limited war was the

exception rather than the rule, so lessons learned from Korea need not be implemented.⁵

It would take the accumulated experience of numerous limited engagements, and more particularly, the Vietnam War, for defense planners to recognize anything approaching the full potential of the carrier. The armed forces, and particularly the Air Force, stumbled into the Vietnam War ill-prepared due to unimaginative thought at the doctrinal level.

Naval Leadership

Uniformed naval leadership took a fall after the “revolt of the admirals.” The senior active officer who testified, Admiral Denfeld was summarily relieved by Secretary Matthews, presumably for his disloyalty toward unification and the JCS system. His firing was handled in much the same discourteous way as the cancellation of *United States*. He learned of his dismissal via the Vice CNO and was subsequently replaced by Admiral Forrest P. Sherman.⁶ Vice Admiral Bogan, unable to testify due to sea maneuvers, chose to retire rather than face assignment to a position of lesser authority. Secretary Matthews ordered him to a posting in a rear admiral’s billet the week before he retired, preventing the “tombstone” promotion to four stars he would have otherwise received.⁷ Captain Crommelin, the antagonist who prompted the revolt, continued to speak out against the system and the “trend toward military dictatorship” he saw it posing and was sent home to Alabama on 15 March 1950 on “extended furlough” with half pay.⁸ There was even an effort to remove Captain Burke’s name from the admiral’s list, but his heroic war record, coupled with Matthew’s blatant vindictiveness, prevented it from happening.⁹ The Navy’s civilian leadership woes did not go totally unnoticed as the *Washington News* reported, “...Secretary of the Navy Matthews does not have the

confidence of the Navy and can not win it...Moreover, Mr. Matthews has forfeited the confidence of Congress by firing Admiral Denfeld.”¹⁰

OP-23

The final casualty of the revolt was the sometimes-controversial organization headed by Captain Burke, OP-23. Admiral Sherman disbanded the organization less than twenty-four hours after taking the oath of office as the new CNO.¹¹ Prior to Sherman’s decision to disband the unit, it had gone through an investigation by the Navy Inspector General. While Burke claimed the investigation was not related to the Congressional testimony and OP-23 did not participate in any “cloak and dagger” operations, the Inspector General did seize documents and the move was viewed in the press as notice by Sherman that organized “Navy opposition to the Pentagon unification program must be stopped.”¹²

Conclusions

In sum, after being defeated in the conflict referred to as the “revolt of the admirals,” the Navy was fortunate that the Korean War, and its associated increase in military spending, validated carrier aviation to a degree. The Navy’s case can be summarized briefly in two ways: weak leadership and an amateur public relations campaign. The Air Force, on the other hand, exhibited consolidated leadership and sophisticated public relations. The Navy’s inability to convey carrier doctrine to policy makers coupled with the Air Force ability to “sell” an inflexible and untested doctrine combined to negatively effect America’s preparedness for two wars and numerous other conflicts of a limited nature. (It is noteworthy that since 1949 ten different Presidents have called on the aircraft carrier in over two hundred conflicts).¹³

Notes

¹ Stafford, “Saving the Carrier-1949 Style,” 49-50.

² Hammond, “Super Carriers and B-36 Bombers,” 547-551.

³ Phillip E. Moseley, *Foreign Affairs* 28, no. 3 (April 1950): 392-394.

⁴ Davis, *Admirals Lobby*, 225.

⁵ Builder, *Icarus Syndrome*, 147-151.

⁶ “Ax for the Admiral,” *Newsweek* 34, no. 19 (7 November 1949): 27-28.

⁷ Stafford, “Saving Carrier Aviation-1949 Style,” 50.

⁸ Ibid., 50. Stafford also notes that ironically, on 1 June 1950, just twenty five days before communist North Korean forces invaded the south and were immediately engaged by carrier aircraft, Captain Crommelin retired.

⁹ Ibid., 50.

¹⁰ Quoted in *Army and Navy Journal* 87, no. 10 (5 November 1949): 250.

¹¹ “Navy Operation 23,” 29.

¹² John G. Norris, “Sherman Ends OP-23 Unit,” *Washington Post*, 4 November 1949 and Harold F. Hinton, “Sherman Puts an End to Operation 23,” *New York Times*, 4 November 1949, and “OP-23 Disbanded,” *Army and Navy Journal* 87, no. 10 (5 November 1949): 251.

¹³ “... Forward from the Sea,” Executive Summary.

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